



Mahmood Mamdani. *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 168 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-05052-5.

Reviewed by Dane Kennedy (George Washington University)

Published on H-Diplo (May, 2013)

Commissioned by Seth Offenbach

Indirect Rule and Its Legacy in Africa

Over the past decade or so, the political scientist and public intellectual Mahmood Mamdani has established himself as one of our most penetrating, provocative, and prolific commentators on modern Africa. He has specialized in probing inquests into the causes of crises such as those that have afflicted Darfur, Rwanda, and Uganda. A dominant theme of his work is that the continent's problems can be traced in large measure to the political and legal structures that colonial regimes left in their wake. In his 2008 W. E. B. Du Bois lectures, now published as *Define and Rule*, he offers some wide-ranging reflections on this colonial legacy, commenting on its intellectual origins and political consequences.

Anyone who has read Mamdani's *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and the Legacy of Late Colonialism* (1996) will find the central thesis of this book familiar: the system of indirect rule that the British instituted across much of Africa was a "quintessentially modern" mode of governance that sought "not just to acknowledge difference but also to shape it" (pp. 1, 2). According to Mamdani, colonial authorities reified two types of difference—race and tribe—which distinguished those who were subject to civil law (Europeans and other immigrants as racial outsiders) from those who were subject to customary law (Africans as tribal natives). The aim of the colonial state was to create a classificatory structure that contained Africans within a multiplicity of mutually exclusive tribal categories, each with its own distinct traditions and territories: divide and rule thus became "define and rule." As Mamdani sees it, the greatest challenge confronting postcolonial Africa has been to escape the enduring effects of those colonial categories and structures.

Perhaps the most striking way the present study departs from Mamdani's previous work can be found in the opening lecture/chapter. Here Mamdani traces the ideological roots of indirect rule in colonial Africa

back to British India in the aftermath of the 1857 mutiny/rebellion. He credits Henry Maine, British India's chief legal official and prominent social theorist, with laying the intellectual foundations for indirect rule. Convinced that the rebellion had been caused by the disintegration of Indian society under the onslaught of Western modernity, Maine argued that colonial policy needed to bolster the traditional bonds of kinship and custom that sustained the village community, which he considered the key stabilizing institution of Indian life. Although Maine's contribution to the Raj's conservative turn after 1857 has been examined in far greater depth in a recent book by Karuna Mantena, the analysis here is cogent and compelling.[1] Moreover, Mamdani provides a postscript that tracks a similar shift in thinking among Dutch East Indies authorities in response to the Aceh rebellion in Sumatra in the late nineteenth century.

The central challenge for Mamdani is to explain how Maine's policy prescriptions, which were crafted in response to the crisis the British faced in India, were transferred to Africa. Mamdani focuses on the Mahdiyya, the late nineteenth-century Islamic uprising in Sudan, which he believes "shook the foundations of empire to the core" in much the same manner as the Indian mutiny/rebellion had done (p. 68). There are several problems with this argument. The Mahdiyya originally arose in opposition to Turko-Egyptian—not British—imperial rule. Although the British became embroiled in Sudan after they occupied Egypt in 1882, they quickly concluded that the place was more trouble than it was worth and ordered the withdrawal of Egyptian forces. Charles "Chinese" Gordon's suicidal decision to disobey those orders certainly complicated matters, but it did not alter the outcome. The British pulled out of Sudan and stayed away for the next sixteen years. When French imperial ambitions spurred a British return in 1898, General Herbert Kitchener's forces crushed the Madhist army at the battle of Omdurman. It

is hard to see how either Britain's original withdrawal from Sudan or its subsequent conquest of the country can be interpreted as a crisis of imperial confidence that led to a Maine-like embrace of indirect rule. It is equally hard to see how British colonial policy across the rest of Africa can be attributed to what happened in Sudan.

At other points in his analysis, Mamdani seems to offer a rather different explanation for the introduction of indirect rule to Africa. He states that Maine's "influence trickled down to all levels of the [colonial] service" when his work became required reading for new cadets (p. 31). Mamdani also tentatively suggests that many "British administrators in Africa ... had more than likely served in the Indian Service" (p. 86). The implication of these claims is that Maine's recommendations for remaking the Raj were "transplanted to African colonies" (p. 7) because they had become administrative orthodoxy, providing a template for application almost anywhere, not because the Mahdiyya had traumatized the British.

The larger question is whether indirect rule was simply imposed from above or responsive to pressures from below. Many historians have viewed indirect rule as a strategy that sought to mask the fragility of colonial regimes by forging alliances with traditional elites. Although this is widely regarded as one of the key outcomes of the administrative reforms that took place in India after 1857, Mamdani has little if anything to say about accommodations with indigenous authorities after the destruction of the Mahdiyya or campaigns of conquests elsewhere in Africa. As he sees it, the introduction of indirect rule was evidence of the colonial state's strength, not its weakness. Indeed, indirect rule is portrayed as a far more insidious form of colonial power than direct rule because it divided African peoples into artificially contrived categories of difference that undermined attempts at mass resistance. Hence Mamdani's stress on the modernity of indirect rule: far from reconciling itself to precolonial authorities and traditions, British policy reified those authorities and traditions for its own pur-

poses. But what were those purposes? Having addressed this issue at some length in previous works, Mamdani devotes little attention to it here. It is fair to say, however, that the debate between Mamdani and his critics largely hinges on how they answer this question.

The book's concluding chapter/lecture focuses on several Africans who are celebrated for their efforts to overcome the fissiparous effects of indirect rule. Mamdani proclaims the Nigerian historian Yusuf Bala Usman "a towering figure among ... postcolonial intellectuals" because he rejected the divisive use of cultural tradition in independent Africa, dismissing it as a residue of indirect rule (p. 88). Usman is contrasted to Western historians of Africa, who are accused of accepting and perpetuating colonialism's artificially contrived cultural divisions. Mamdani's other hero is Julius Nyerere, the founding father of independent Tanzania, whose policies are praised as "the most successful attempt to dismantle the structures of indirect rule" (p. 107). Nyerere's Arusha Declaration and his forced villagization program are presented as important instruments in that process of dismantlement. Others are more qualified than I to evaluate these claims.

As the published version of three public lectures, *Define and Rule* cannot be judged by the standards we apply to academic monographs. This slim volume covers a great deal of ground, but makes no pretense of comprehensiveness or analytical cohesion; it is meant to probe, challenge, and provoke debate. By those criteria, it is a success. It will do nothing to diminish Mamdani's reputation as one of our most impassioned commentators on colonialism's impact on modern Africa.

Note

[1]. Karuna Mantena, *Alibis of Empire: Henry Maine and the Ends of Liberal Imperialism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010). Mamdani gave his Du Bois lectures several years before the publication of Mantena's book.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:

<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: Dane Kennedy. Review of Mamdani, Mahmood, *Define and Rule: Native as Political Identity*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. May, 2013.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=38337>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.